

Executive Summary

Why has the robust and compelling body of climate change science not had a greater impact on action, especially in the United States?

From the policy-making level down to personal voting and purchasing decisions, our actions as Americans have not been commensurate with the threat as characterized by mainstream science.

Meaningful pockets of entrepreneurial initiative have emerged at the city and state level, in the business sector, and in “civil society” more generally. But we remain far short of undertaking the emissions reductions that scientists say are required if we are to forestall dangerous interference in the climate system on which civilization depends.

In late 2005, the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies convened 110 leaders and thinkers in Aspen, Colorado, and asked them to diagnose the reasons for this posited action shortfall and to generate recommendations to address it. This report discusses findings from that gathering of extraordinary Americans.

Part I of this report is a synthesis that highlights eight selected themes from the Conference, each of which relates to a cluster of diagnoses, recommendations, and important lines of debate or inquiry. Part II describes the diagnoses and 39 recommendations from the eight working groups. The eight themes and ten of the most prominent recommendations are spotlighted below.

THEMES FROM PART I

Scientific Disconnects

We are only aware of climate change as a human-induced phenomenon because of science. Given this scientific “origin,” the default tendency of those who seek to propagate the issue throughout society is to preserve its scientific trappings: by retaining scientific terminology, relying on scientists as lead messengers, and adhering to norms of scientific conservatism. Such practices can cause profound disconnects in how society interprets and acts on the climate change issue, and they deserve our remedial attention.

From Science to Values

Given the challenges with propagating the science of climate change throughout society, many people now favor shifting to a values-based approach to motivating action on the issue. Religious communities, in

particular, are increasingly adopting the climate change issue in fulfillment of their stewardship values. Yet a science-to-values repositioning, whether religious or secular, carries risks of its own that need to be understood and managed.

Packaging Climate Change as an Energy Issue

Frustrated by the inability of climate change to break through as an urgent public concern, many believe it is best to finally admit that the issue cannot stand on its own. Climate change can be packaged with other issues that have generated more public concern to date – and energy security is a leading candidate. This is a promising strategy, but it also risks deemphasizing climate change mitigation as an explicit societal priority precisely when it needs to move up on the list.

Incentives

It is tempting to reduce the challenge of promoting action on climate change to matters of communications and strategic positioning. Yet this will usually only take us part of the way. Translating awareness into action depends on identifying – and selectively modifying – the deeper incentive structures at play in our society. Harnessing climate change objectives to the material incentives to modify energy supply and use patterns is an important part of the equation. But a more thorough domain-by-domain analysis of career and organizational incentives yields additional levers for fashioning a broad-based set of strategies.

Diffusion of Responsibility

After evaluating the incentives operating within each of the eight societal domains represented at the Conference, it is now worthwhile to reassemble the pieces and identify patterns cutting across them. Doing so yields the sobering insight that we are experiencing diffusion of responsibility on climate change. While no single individual or domain can plausibly be expected to take solitary charge on this encompassing problem, many who could assume leadership appear to think it is someone else's prerogative, or obligation, to do so. The result: a leadership vacuum.

The Affliction of Partisanship

Climate change is a partisan issue in today's America. The policy stalemate in Washington, D.C. has left those committed to action uncertain about whether a partisan or bipartisan strategy is more likely

to succeed going forward. For all its direct costs, partisanship has also had profound spillover effects, chilling public engagement on climate change throughout our society and compelling many people to take sides instead of collaborating to craft policies and actions as warranted by the science.

Setting Goals

Those working to promote societal action on climate change need to do a better job of formulating goals that are capable of promoting convergent strategies by dispersed and often uncoordinated actors, and commensurate with a real solution to the problem. In order to guide and motivate needed actions, these goals should be generated collaboratively, scientifically calibrated, quantifiable, trackable and easily expressible. They should include not only emissions targets but also, given the crucial importance of “public will,” attitudinal targets.

Leveraging the Social Sciences

The facts of climate change cannot be left to speak for themselves. They must be actively communicated with the right words, in the right dosages, packaged with narrative storytelling that is based rigorously on reality, personalized with human faces, made vivid through visual imagery – and delivered by the right messengers. Doing this will require that climate change communications go from being a data-poor to a data-rich arena. Social science methods have not been adequately applied to date – and that must change, given the stakes.

TEN RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PART II

Part II of this report describes in detail the diagnoses of the science-action gap that were conducted by each of the eight working groups, and subsequently refined in mixed-group formats. It also lays out each of the 39 recommendations, providing supporting rationales and in some cases points of debate. The recommendations represent the output of concentrated dialogue among a thoughtful and diverse group of Americans, but sign-off should not be construed, as they were not submitted to a vote or any consensus-building procedures. The following constitute ten of the most prominent recommendations to emerge.

Recommendation #1: Create a new “bridging institution” to actively seek out key business, religious, political, and civic leaders and the media and deliver to them independent, reliable and credible scientific information about climate change (including natural and economic sciences).

Recommendation #7: Educate the gatekeepers (i.e., editors). In order to improve the communication of climate science in the news media, foster a series of visits and conferences whereby respected journalists and editors informed on climate change can speak to their peer editors. The objective is to have those who can credibly talk about story ideas and craft reach out to their peers about how to cover the climate change issue with appropriate urgency, context, and journalistic integrity.

Recommendation #11: Religious leaders and communities must recognize the scale, urgency and moral dimension of climate change, and the ethical unacceptability of any action that damages the quality and viability of life on Earth, particularly for the poor and most vulnerable.

Recommendation #20: Design and execute a “New Vision for Energy” campaign to encourage a national market-based transition to alternative energy sources. Harness multiple messages tailored to different audiences that embed the climate change issue in a larger set of co-benefit narratives, such as: reducing U.S. dependency on Middle East oil (national security); penetrating global export markets with American innovations (U.S. stature); boosting U.S. job growth (jobs); and cutting local air pollution (health).

Recommendation #25: Create a new overarching communications entity or project to design and execute a well-financed public education campaign on climate change science and its implications. This multi-faceted campaign would leverage the latest social science findings concerning attitude formation and change on climate change, and would use all available media in an effort to disseminate rigorously accurate information, and to counter disinformation in real time.

Recommendation #26: Undertake systematic and rigorous projects to test the impact of environmental communications in all media (e.g., advertising, documentary, feature film) on civic engagement, public

opinion and persuasive outcomes. Use these to inform new creative work on multi-media climate change communications.

Recommendation #28: Improve K-12 students' understanding of climate change by promoting it as a standards-based content area within science curricula and incorporating it into other disciplinary curricula and teacher certification standards. Use the occasion of the state reviews of science standards for this purpose, which are being prompted by the states' need to comply with the Fall 2007 start of high-stakes science testing under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Recommendation #29: Organize a grassroots educational campaign to create local narratives around climate change impacts and solutions, while mobilizing citizen engagement and action. Kick the campaign off with a National Climate Week that would recur on an annual basis.

Recommendation #33: The Business & Finance working group at the Conference composed an eight-principle framework, and proposed that it be disseminated broadly to trade associations and individual business leaders (especially at the CEO and board level) as a set of clear and feasible actions that businesses can and should take on climate change.

Recommendation #36: Create a broad-based Climate Action Leadership Council of 10-12 recognizable and senior eminent leaders from all key national sectors and constituencies to serve as an integrating mechanism for developing and delivering a cohesive message to society about the seriousness of climate change and the imperative of taking action. The Council would include leaders from business, labor, academia, government, the NGO sector, the professions (medicine, law, and public health) and community leaders. They would be chosen on the basis of their credibility within their respective communities, but also across society at large.

To learn more about how you can participate in implementation of the full set of 39 recommendations, please visit:
<http://environment.yale.edu/climate>

Part I

Matching Up to the Perfect Problem

